

Meeting the Challenge

Don Porter: Can you elaborate a little bit on a good strategy or strategies for teachers who are faced with this challenge of promoting literacy and language development in two languages?

Dr. Linda Espinosa: Two languages, right. And it is a challenge. And I think we're just really beginning to have well-developed strategies for teachers in any preschool setting, any early childhood setting. One thing we do know, in the state of Washington and across the country, most preschool teachers are monolingual English-speaking. If you have language support, it's usually from a paraprofessional. And so teachers are feeling overwhelmed by the need to respond to multiple languages when they in fact are monolingual English-speaking.

There are—we've designed a whole set of strategies called “personal oral language learning” for monolingual English-speaking teachers to acknowledge, value, and bring in the home language into the classroom so the child will continue to feel it as a part of their educational setting. Not necessarily the main language of instruction, but there are ways that you can use families, you can use community members, you can use paraprofessionals—we have a lot of materials that are easily accessible through the internet to provide enriched opportunities in languages other than English. Everything from just printing signs, color coding them in different languages, having them available so the child can see it, having the child's picture and their name represented in their home language as well as English, so you do both. Simple things that everybody can do that promotes this sort of additive environment that I talk about, that I think once teachers figure it out, they realize it's not overwhelming, it's in fact—I think deepens our professional experiences. Because that is the 21st century. That is it. We're no longer a monolingual...

Don: Right, and then one variant of that would be in so many—in a lot of classrooms, it's not uncommon to find, say, Spanish is spoken by most of the children, so what then does the teacher—what attitude then does the teacher take toward the challenge? Do they teach mostly in Spanish, or do they teach mostly in English? How do you balance that out?

Linda: Okay, in an ideal situation, let's say you have 20 children in your classroom, let's say you have 12 who come from Spanish-speaking homes, you have 8 from a variety of other things. Let's say you have a teacher who does—who is proficient in Spanish and English. The ideal situation, and we have good data on this now, is that you do a 50-50. You do 50% of your time in Spanish, 50% in English, but you have to sort of carefully design that. So it's not spontaneous or spur of the moment. You really decide, “I'm doing Monday, Wednesday, Friday in Spanish, Tuesday—” whatever, and then you keep to that. We did a.m./p.m. because that was easier for us to do because of our staffing patterns, but that—that allows the child to develop conceptually, linguistically across all the domains in both languages, which there's no doubt that they can do this. It's just up to us, really, to structure the environment.